NUMB. LIV.

The Prompter.

To be Continued TUESDAYS and FRIDAYS.

What a Blow *was here given,----if it had not* fallen flat-long!

SHAKESP. Tempeſt.

FRIDAY, MAY 16. 1735.

I GAVE ſome Reaſons, in my Laſt, why an Attempt of our Play-houſe *Patentees*, to ſecure to *Themſelves*, *their Heirs*, and *Aſſigns*, a MONOPOLY of *Dramatic* WIT, in this Kingdom, was an arrogant, and ill-grounded Proof, that They had but *little* of the *Commodity* to *ſpare*, notwithſtanding their Deſign to *engroſs* it.— I offer'd Arguments, for demonſtrating a Difference between INTERLUDES, and the *Tragedies* and *Comedies* of our *Theatres*: and endeavour'd to *ſhew*, that the *Statute* of the 39*th* of *Eliz.*, [illegible] was, much more probably, intended in FAVOUR of the *Stage*; which was *founded*, and *encourag'd*, in *Her* Reign: and, that the Words *Common Players of Interludes* cou'd not, with any Propriety of Meaning, relate to *regular* and *qualified Profeſſors of the Art*, but to ignorant, and unſettled, *Strollers* only: And, to *Them*, too, NOT becauſe the Buſineſs they took upon them was *illegal*: but becauſe they were *incapable* of it's *Duties*.

I come now to another Diviſion of my Purpoſe; which is, to conſider, *why* the BILL, as ſolicited by thoſe intereſted *Managers*, was neither *neceſſary*, nor *expedient*; and with what *Variation* It might poſſibly have been form'd, in ſuch manner, as to have been acknowledg'd both the *One* and the *Other*.

HAD not the Wiſdom of an illuſtrious Body diſtinguiſh'd, as It juſtly did, between *Regulating* Players, and *immuring* them, between the *Improvement* of a THEATRE, and the *Enrichment* of it's MANAGERS, The ever-to-be lamented *Succeſs* of Two or Three Private Men's *Preſumption*, wou'd have torn away from the *Publick Hope*, all Means, Expectation, or Likelyhood, of ever ſeeing the *Stage* in a Condition becoming the *Greatneſs* of a *People*, who wou'd be thought either *Letter'd*, or *Politic*. — We might have plac'd over the Doors of our Theatres, this *Proclamation*, out of the *then irrecoverably deſerted* SHAKESPEAR,

" *Our* Revels, *now*, *are* ENDED — *Our* Actors
" *are* melted *into* AIR!"

THAT unattentive and indolent Survey, with which moſt Readers run over theſe Papers of the Week, makes it neceſſary to *repeat*, Confeſſions we wou'd wiſh *remember'd* — Let me therefore, here *again*, declare, that I *allow* the *Stage* to be CORRUPT, and that it languiſhes for *Reformation*. — But, I cannot, without *ſtumbling*, get over ſuch a RUB, in the Way of *Common Senſe*, as, that, *Appropriating* the *Power* of *Corrupting* it farther, to Thoſe who have been ſo active in corrupting it *already*, is the *Means* of Protecting us, againſt the *Growth* of its Corruption!

IT is not from the *Number*, but the *Nature*, of Things, we are to expect their *Influence*, in Good, or Evil. — Let the *Root* of a Tree be *ſound*, and the *Soil not improper*, and It will never the ſooner *wither*, for the *Wideneſs* of it's *Branches*.

EVEN were we, for Argument's ſake, to allow that the *Stage* is *dangerous*, *in itſelf*, I don't know, but an *Act* for it's *Reſtraint*, might tend rather to make it *Deſirable*, than *weaken* it's Influence.—When ſome Deep, and turbulent *River*, has obſtructed the March of an Army, we read of *Generals*, who, by MULTIPLYING it's *Channels*, have reduc'd it to the requiſite *Shallowneſs*. — Why ſhou'd we not expect a Like *Effect*, from a *Cauſe* of the ſame Nature, ſuppoſing it applied to the *Play-houſes*? — Were their Numbers to be encreas'd, The Delight they afford wou'd, in Conſequence, be *Leſs tempting*: The NOVELTY taken away, wou'd inſenſibly diminiſh the *Deſire* — And, when thoſe *Honeſt Citizens*, of whoſe Welfare their Magiſtrates are *ſo prudently* careful, ſhou'd find *Play-houſes*, as familiar to them as their *Wives*, they wou'd grow *leſs fond* of them for the ſame Reaſon. So that, in *This* Light, their *Reſtraint* were bad Policy.

IT has been urg'd, with more *Noiſe*, than *Argument*, that, without ſome ſeaſonable Reſtraint, we might come to have a *Play-houſe ſet up in every Street*. ——The very ſame Complaint was made, by ſome *gloomy Enthuſiaſts*, in the Reign of King *Charles* the *Firſt*.—There were, then, EIGHT *Play-houſes* within the Bills of Mortality, and the Town ſcarce *Half* ſo large, or ſo populous, as at preſent.—Theſe were ſo many *Looking-Glaſſes*, in which thoſe Promoters of Faction, and Anarchy, *ſaw Themſelves*, and were mortified.——At Length, together with *Law*, *Religion*, and *Monarchy*; down went the *Theatres!* —— But, what *aroſe*, in their Place, gave, I think, no

no great Inducement, to make us fond of renewing the Example.

A *Play-houſe, in every Street*, is a Sentence, that, (like PATENTEES *of the* THEATRE) carries an *empty*, tho' *formidable*, Sound!—The Words have *Menace*, and *Vanity*; but their *Meaning* is light, and ridiculous.—Let us ſuppoſe a *Foundation* for the extravagant *Idea:* —What Ill Conſequence cou'd follow?—Are there not TAVERNS, in every Street? Places, whoſe Support depends, *really*, on That *Luxury*, which is but aukwardly, and affectedly, made a Ground-work for the Encreaſe of our *Theatres?*—Let us imagine the Number of theſe *Taverns* reduc'd to a *Fourth*, by Effect of ſome ACT of *Reformation*, which had the Honour to be *ſolicited*, by Men of ſuch known *Self-denial*, and *Gravity*, as the *Managers* of our *Farces*, and *Opera's*;—Shou'd we, then, ſee *Drunkenneſs* diminiſh, in Proportion to ſo *pious* a *Reduction?*—Not at all.—The Caſe, as it regards the *Publick*, wou'd be found *juſt the ſame:* The Taverns remaining, being a *Fourth* of their former Number, wou'd have *Four times their former Cuſtom:* And the only Improvement viſible wou'd be, that a *Few* wou'd grow *extravagantly* Rich, upon the Follies of the Publick, inſtead of a *Great many* MODERATELY ſo.

IT wou'd be the ſame Thing exactly, in the Caſe of the *Play-houſes*—Any Reſtraint of their *Number*, without proportionable *Enlargement* to their *Manager's Capacity*, (an Extent of *Grace*, for which I have heard of *no Precedent*, in *Parliament*) wou'd be of Benefit only to the *Licentiates* of *Dullneſs*.—HARLEQUIN's *Dogs* might, indeed, be transform'd, into *Race-Horſes:* and He might call up New *Domes*, to ſuſtain *Himſelf*, in Place of *depos'd* MERCURY; inſulting *Wit*, with the *Triumphs* of *Folly:* But *far* wou'd All This be from refining, or correcting, the *Stage!*—EMULATION, on the contrary, wou'd be *extinguiſh'd*, both in *Actors*, and *Managers*; and Theatric Entertainment muſt degenerate, in Proportion.

NOW, to conſider, in it's Turn, the *Reverſe* of this Proſpect, Let it be ſuppos'd, that the *Parliament*, not ſeeing by the *Lights* which our Patentees have held out *to direct* them, ſhou'd find Reaſons of their *own* for permitting the Theatres to go on, unmoleſted, and preſcribe *no Reſtraint* to their Number—What, *then*, wou'd be the Conſequence?—Why, truly, *This neceſſary Good One*, that the *Wiſeſt*, among ſuch a Crowd of Rival Managers, wou'd *break*, and ſilence, the *Silliеſt*.—At leaſt, when Every Body ſhou'd find himſelf at Liberty to make Trial of the Force of his Genius, *Dull* Directors of Theatres might be *ſham'd* into Improvement of their own *Bad* Taſte, by Example of a *Better*. Whereas *Patents* for *Retale* of *Wit*, are like *Priſons*, which ſell *Wine* to their *Lodgers*; It wou'd be in vain to find Fault with it's *Taſte:* It is not ſold, for YOUR *Pleaſure*; but for the PROFIT of your *Keeper*.

AFTER having, thus plainly, declar'd for what Reaſons I am pleas'd with That *Damp* which has been thrown, by the *Legiſlature*, upon the Warmth of the Manager's Expectation, and Avarice, I ſhall offer my Thoughts in a *Hint*, How a *virtual Reſtraint* may be capable of anſwering every Good Purpoſe, without any of that unneceſſary *Severity*, which wou'd be ſuppos'd to accompany an *actual* one.

INSTEAD of *putting down* all Play-houſes, but ſuch as are *ſtamp'd* with the *Mark* of Authority, and carry their LEAD, at the *Head* of the *Piece*, like *Broad-Cloth*, in the Shops of our *Woollen-Drapers*, It wou'd be ſufficient, (or I am greatly *out* in my Judgment)—to *prohibit* the Acting any *Farce*, *Harlequinery*, *Buffoonery*, or other, *dancing*, *ſinging*, *dumb*, or *deſerveing-to-be dumb*, ENTERTAINMENT, or any Thing beyond, *Plain* TRAGEDY, or COMEDY,—Except only in the ROYAL, and *Licens'd Theatres*.—

SUCH an Act muſt be approv'd, *even* by the *Patentees:* becauſe It wou'd leave to thoſe *Sampſons* of the Stage, the *lovely* DALILAHS they are ſo fond of; and beſtow nothing upon their *Rivals*, but what *They* have made it a *Choice*, to *part with*, *already*.

IT muſt be approv'd, by the *Actors*, becauſe, being wholly *Uſeleſs*, as the Theatres are *manag'd* at preſent; They wou'd be reſtor'd to a Chance, in the *New* ones, of recovering their Diſtinction, and Encouragement.

IT muſt be approv'd, by the *Town*, becauſe Audiences wou'd be left to the Enjoyment of their *natural Liberty*.—The *Gay*, and the *Faſhionable*, might meet one another at the *Sign* of the *Licenſe:* While the *Wiſe*, and the *Serious*, wou'd content themſelves with *plain* REASON, nor regard *Good Senſe* the Leſs, becauſe *My Lord* has no Taſte for it.

ONE of Theſe following *Conſequences* muſt, inevitably, attend ſuch a General Indulgence to *Poor Senſe*, with *Reſtraint* from thoſe *Fine Things only*, which are *fit* for *Rank*, and *Diſtinction:*—Either the New Theatres, *Encouragement failing*, muſt *drop*, *of Themſelves*; in which Caſe the *Guilt* of their *Murder* cou'd not be charg'd upon their *Rivals*.—Or, Their *Succeſs*, ſhou'd they meet with it, muſt be the *Reward* of their *Merit*, in *Acting*, and of their *Skill* in the *Choice* of their *Pieces*: in which Laſt Caſe, They wou'd correct, and reform, their Competitors of the *Patents*; till, by out-acting, and out-managing them, They might (I ſpeak, with due *Salvo*, to the *Poſſibility* of the Suppoſition!) SHAME thoſe *licens'd* Stage-Triflers, out of *Corruption*, and *Ignorance:* and compel 'em, in Conſequence, either to *give up* their affected *Diſtinction*; or maintain it, by a *well-grounded* Superiority, in their *Judgment*, and *Influence*.

I have now done with That Part of my Subject which relates, in particular, to the *Managers* of our Theatres: and ſhall only, in my Paſſing to the *Players*, add a Word, in *Reſpect* to an Argument, that is urg'd, with much ſpecious Appearance of *Juſtice*, in Right of a PURCHACE, made by *One*, (and beyond all Compariſon the *Moſt Conſiderable*) of the Gentlemen, whoſe Pretenſions I have been ſpeaking of.—It is ſaid, *He is oppreſs'd, by a confederated Exceſs of Demand: and has been forc'd into ſuch extravagant and inſupportable Conditions, that He acts, not for any Profit He can poſſibly expect to Himſelf; but to furniſh his Actors with exorbitant and un-precedented Salaries*.

I am afraid, He ſuffers, like *Phaeton*, for an Ambition to DRIVE, where his Inexperience compell'd him to be DRIVEN.—A Gentleman, *as* a *Gentleman*, may have a Thouſand agreeable Qualities, none of which cou'd enable him to *Weave*, or make *Bone-Lace*.—That, which *Skill* is, to *Trade*, ſuch is *Genius*, to *Acting*.——Where a Rider *ſits looſe*, the *veriеſt Jade* will grow *Reſtive*.—It is of abſolute Neceſſity, that *He* who diſpenſes the *Reward*, ſhou'd be alſo a *Judge* of the *Merit*.

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